

Environmental Water Caucus

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BACK TO THE PAST Environmental and Fishing Groups say CalFed Water Plan Relies More on Concrete than Innovation and Conservation

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SAN FRANCISCO - A repackaging of tired ideas rather than fresh, thoughtful solutions. An over-reliance on concrete rather than the proven innovations of water conservation. More threats to California's fish and wildlife rather than improvement to their habitats.

Those problems are how environmental and fishing organizations characterized the draft plan for California's water future released today by the governmental consortium known as CalFed.

More than a dozen organizations criticized the plan as it was released, saying that CalFed has not asked the right questions and its documents do not provide information the public needs to make an informed choice. The most glaring omissions are CalFed's neglect of the proven cost-effectiveness of water conservation and the relationship between healthy streams and high quality drinking water.

"CalFed seems intent on ignoring the lessons of history. It's a document stuck in reverse, a wishful throwback to the era of big dams, sterile channels and lifeless canals," said Tom Graff, Senior Attorney of the Environmental Defense Fund.

Anglers and environmentalists said that reading between the lines of CalFed's 12-volume document reveals an outdated engineering desire for the same type of water projects that caused many of the problems in the first place. They said the proposed CalFed solutions will only put new burdens on taxpayers and the environment.

Among the major deficiencies in the draft report is a goal to conserve less than one percent of the water currently used by California agriculture. CalFed's water conservation goals appear out of touch with the proven potential for conservation. Innovative farmers and water districts are implementing practices that show significant water savings.

(more)

"CalFed's water conservation program is so unambitious, it doesn't pass the straight-face test," said Ronnie Cohen, Policy Analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "The program is missing a tremendous opportunity to move California water management into the next millennium."

Cohen's criticisms are echoed by others familiar with water conservation programs in the state.

"Our experience in Los Angeles is testimony to the success of conservation," said Frances Spivy-Weber, Executive Director of the Mono Lake Committee. "We are only using four percent more water now than we did nearly three decades years ago despite a population that's grown 28 percent since 1970."

The CalFed program, developed by state and federal resource agencies over the past three years, aims to address the over-use of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay. Fed by the rivers and streams of the vast Central Valley and Sierra Nevada range, the Bay/Delta is the heart of California's natural water system, supporting 120 species of fish and wildlife. It is also the hub for a complex plumbing system of canals and pumps built to quench the thirst of 22 million California residents.

Commercial anglers who rely on freshwater flows to maintain their fishing stocks also expressed concern about the CalFed proposal.

"If this water plan fails to address the real problems, its impacts will be felt by the fishing industry, which has already lost 80 per cent of its jobs in the last 20 years," said Zeke Grader of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "We're expecting CalFed to stop sticking it to the fish and fishermen, and provide some relief to us hardworking taxpayers."

Grader and his colleagues say additional shortcomings of CalFed's document include its failure to fully explore:

- The benefits of natural cleansing processes that bring healthier water with restored wetlands, forests, and meadows;
- The potential of non-chlorinated treatment of drinking water to protect public health for less money than building a Peripheral Canal;
- The water quality and environmental benefits of restoring freshwater flows to the Central Valley rivers, streams and into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta;
- More alternatives to the long-troubled Peripheral Canal.

"CalFed insists on looking back to a Peripheral Canal and a new round of dams, even though these projects do not make ecological or fiscal sense," said Jackie McCort of the Sierra Club. "We don't need to capture more water, we need to capture more water savings," she added.

"It's bad enough that CalFed is drifting towards the Peripheral Canal, but now Governor Wilson is pushing a bond act that would ask California taxpayers to foot the bill for dam-building projects costing millions of dollars. Our environment wouldn't survive another round of water development to benefit San Joaquin Valley agribusiness," said Barry Nelson of Save San Francisco Bay Association.

The Environmental Water Caucus is a coalition working toward a sustainable water future for California. The EWC steering committee includes: Audubon Chapters, California League of Conservation Voters, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, Clean Water Action, Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the River, Natural Heritage Institute, Natural Resources Defense Council, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Sierra Club, Save San Francisco Bay Association, The Bay Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and United Anglers.

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